

# Individual Psychological Characteristics of Members of Destructive Religious and Ethno-Nationalist Organizations

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** The relevance of the study is determined by the intensification of the spread of ethno-nationalist sentiments among young people. The purpose of the research is to identify the individual psychological characteristics of the young people being members of destructive religious and ethno-nationalist organizations. **Methods/Statistical analysis:** The study is based on the fundamental principles of psychology and carried out using its traditional and classical methods: psycho diagnostics and comparative analysis. **Findings:** The paper deals with the concepts of ethno-nationalist organizations and destructive religious organizations; it analyzes the psychological essence of nationalism and its various forms in relation to patriotism. The authors examine the specificity of the interaction of some modern neo-pagan and nationalist movements, trends and determinants of the manifestations of extremism as regards race, nationality, language, origin and religion on their basis. The paper presents the results of a study of individual psychological characteristics of the persons involved in destructive religious and ethno-nationalist organizations; gives practical recommendations for preventing the spread of ethno-nationalist sentiments among youth. **Application/Improvements:** Scientifically proven information obtained as the result of the empirical research, makes it possible to deeper understand the psychological laws and mechanisms of young people's involvement in destructive religious organizations and spread of ethno-nationalist sentiments among them.

**Keywords:** Destructive Organizations, Nationalism, Neo-Paganism, Patriotism

## 1. Introduction

One of the sources of formation of ethno-nationalist attitudes is the activity of destructive religious organizations. Psychological determinants of nationalism, its genesis and types are complex and multifaceted, and their scientific cognition is extremely important at the present time. In modern Russia, nationalism is a paradoxical supplement to globalization: economic, political and sociocultural<sup>1</sup>. The patriotism is traditionally offered as a desired synthesis which would be a logical solution of the contradiction between these phenomena, as it combines openness to

historical process dynamics and respect and love for our national culture, history and traditions<sup>2</sup>.

Patriotic mindset is based on the interpretation of the concept of "the people" as a "civil nation", consolidated by the history, culture, economic and political interests, and the identification of a person with the citizenship of his/her country<sup>3</sup>. For large multinational states, patriotic sentiments are important for the consolidation of the population which is heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity and religion<sup>4</sup>.

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Nationalist attitudes can be assessed in an ambivalent manner. If they combine the positive ethnic self-identity with the recognition of the dignity of other nations and ethnic groups, they can harmoniously complement patriotism<sup>5-6</sup> and promote the interest in Russian culture, history, art, folklore and linguistics<sup>1,7</sup>. However, there are also radical forms, patriotism antagonistic and contrary to the interests of the state, including xenophobia, negative ethnic self-identity (consolidation against the “strangers”), incitement of ethnic hatred and separatism<sup>8-10</sup>. “Everyday nationalism” is a common phenomenon in human history<sup>5,11,12</sup>.

The concept of “nationalism” in the scientific literature has a wide range of interpretations, but they are usually defining its ethnic type, “ethnic nationalism”, radical forms of which include Nazism, fascism and neo-fascism<sup>13,14</sup>. Ethno-nationalist concepts are characterized by eclecticism and alogism, impact on emotional sphere, relying on abstract ideals, myths and traditions, which determined their similarity and connection with destructive religious organizations<sup>7,9,15,16</sup>. There are examples of their synergy and mutual reinforcement in the framework of the so-called “national” religions, peculiar to nation states, relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnic and religious composition (Shintoism, Taoism, Hinduism, etc.). They are historically more ancient, but fewer in number of followers than non-national “world” religions, which include Christianity, Islam and Buddhism<sup>12,17</sup>. In turn, the doctrines of world religions are antagonistic to ethnic nationalism, as they are not only focused on preaching to the representatives of all nationalities, but also assert the insignificance of national characteristics for the spiritual life of man<sup>10,14</sup>.

Since the largest part of believers in Russia professes non-national world religions, the search for religious foundations of ethnic nationalism has given an impetus to the formation of new religious neopagan movements (“sects”), many of which intensify its radicalization<sup>11</sup>. Their spread is restricted by the legislation of the Russian Federation, as the activities of many of them are qualified as a criminal offense in accordance with art. 280 and 282 of the Russian Criminal Code<sup>18,19</sup>. However, the rapid pace of classification of such organizations and their information as extremist lags behind the pace of change of their names, and creation of new associations, websites and informational materials. Major mass media, for example the outlets such as “TV-3”, “TNT” and “REN-TV” indirectly contribute to their expansion, as

they popularize various forms of extrasensory perception, parapsychology, astrology, yoga, shamanism, magic, and other non-traditional or archaic religious practices typical for new religious movements (“sects<sup>15</sup>”).

The main part of information aggression is carried out via the less censored Internet network and is aimed primarily at young people<sup>20,21</sup>. In the context of neopaganism, and especially its pseudo-Russian variation, the so-called “Rodnoverie”, radical ethnic nationalism is one of the most important doctrinal foundations (as their argumentation against the world religions is based on anti-Semitism, even explicit neo-fascism<sup>22</sup>). Typical examples: teachings of “Ancient Russian Ynglist Church of the Orthodox Old Believers-Ynglings”, “Concept of Public Security (CPS)”, members of the “Circle of pagan tradition”, “Union of Slavic Native Faith Communities”, “Ves Circle” and others. The authors of pseudo-linguistic and pseudo-historical teachings (are a kind of neo-paganism “apologists”).

The popularity of such destructive religious and ethno-nationalist organizations is great enough, which determines the relevance of the study of psychological mechanisms of attracting young people to them.

Criteria of destructiveness of religious organizations and nationalist organizations are: rejection of common social values and priorities, re-orientation of consciousness and self-consciousness by switching from the standpoint of life-affirmation and creation to the position of isolation, destruction and self-destruction.

## 2. Goals and Hypothesis

The aim of the study is to identify individual psychological characteristics of the young people involved in destructive religious and ethno-nationalist organizations. Scientifically proven information obtained as the result of the empirical research, makes it possible to deeper understand the psychological laws and mechanisms of young people’s involvement in destructive religious organizations and spread among them of ethno-nationalist sentiments.

## 3. Methodological Framework

Empirical research was carried out in accordance with the following fundamental principles of psychology: principle of determinism, unity of consciousness and activity, consistency and integrity. The research sample consisted

of 172 young people aged between 18 and 25 years and was divided into two study groups, contrasting in terms of belonging to non-traditional religious organizations and nationalist organizations, and identical in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics. The experimental group consisted of 82 people being members of non-traditional religious sects and nationalist youth organizations functioning in the territory of Russia and Belarus. The control group consisted of 90 young people having no connections and no relatives connected to similar organizations. Using selected psychodiagnostic methods (Method of diagnostics of the level of development of critical thinking; Method of diagnostics of types of accentuated personality traits by Value orientations (Rokeach's method); Method of diagnostics of the level of subjective feelings of loneliness by Method of multivariate study of personality by (form C)) we have examined the features of the development of their cognitive, value-conceptual, need-motivational and emotional-volitional spheres of personality. Individual and psychological characteristics of members of destructive religious and ethno-nationalist organizations were identified based on the results of the comparative analysis of the corresponding values recorded in the two groups of respondents. Statistical analysis of empirical data included calculation of the arithmetic mean in the group, standard deviation, representative error and Student's t-test, making it possible to detect the presence or absence of an honestly significant difference between study samples in the group average values of an indicator.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

In accordance with the results obtained using the Method of diagnostics of the level of development of critical thinking Table 1, cognitive sphere of personality of young people involved in destructive religious organizations and nationalist organizations is characterized by a low level of development of critical thinking, uncritical readiness to obey, to be influenced by others' moods and copy habits of other people, to imitate and change their opinion under the majority influence. Subjects in the control group showed higher levels of independence of judgment, inner-directedness and independent thinking. The biggest differences were recorded on a "Suggestibility" scale ( $t=4.78, p<0.001$ ). Those involved in the activities of non-traditional religious organizations are characterized by increased obedience, perception of information without

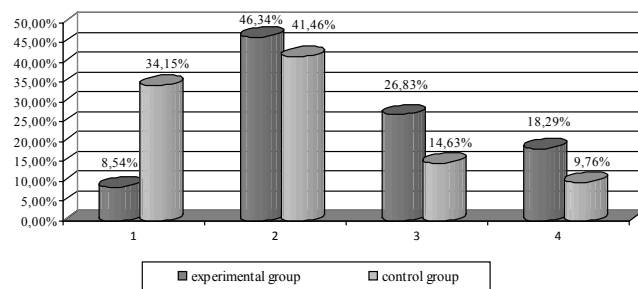
thinking critically, tendency to pay attention to powerful and highly-charged emotional information without analyzing, and its interpretation in accordance with their mental state.

Results of the study of accentuated personality traits of members of destructive religious organizations and nationalist organizations obtained by the method of Leonhard-Shmishek make it possible to state that although the percentage distribution of both groups are characterized by an average degree of manifestation of accented character traits, they have an honestly significant differences between them Figure 1.

It is worth mentioning that 26.83% of the total number of subjects being members of non-traditional religious organizations and nationalist organizations have a high degree, and 18.29% a borderline degree of manifestation of certain traits, close to psychopathy; while the percentage of such young people in the control group is much lower: 14.63% of those having a high degree and 9.76 of those having a borderline degree of manifestation, respectively.

**Table 1.** Results of the comparative analysis of the level of development of critical thinking in the two study groups

| Questionnaire scales                              | EG       | CG       | Student's t-test | p      |
|---|----------|----------|------------------|--------|
| Conformity  | 12.8±1.2 | 7.4±0.7  | 4.03             | <0.001 |
| Suggestibility                                    | 6.4±0.6  | 3.2±0.3  | 4.78             | <0.001 |
| Skepticism  | 4.2±0.4  | 4.8±0.5  | 0.94             | >0.05  |
| General level of development of critical thinking | 9.00±0.9 | 18.2±1.8 | 4.58             | <0.001 |



**Figure 1.** Percentage distribution of the subjects of the two study groups according to the degree of manifestation of their accentuated personality traits. Symbolic representation: 1 - low degree of manifestation of accentuated personality traits; 2 - moderate degree; 3 - high degree; 4 - borderline accentuation degree.

Table 2 presents the results of the comparative analysis of indicators of accentuated personality traits of the subjects of the two study groups, reflecting the specifics of “psychological portraits” of each of them.

Unlike their age-mates not interested in any religious teachings (neither traditional nor non-traditional), members of destructive religious organizations are less aggressive, conflict, light-minded and energetic; according to our research, they do not tend to be in the spotlight, to provoke conflicts and foment intrigues. They are highly sensitive, too vulnerable, especially regarding themselves, and are very sore over a failure. More than young people not belonging to religious sects and cults, they prefer selective communication with other people, tending to interact only with close ones, who are by their opinion those who support them and show understanding. The extreme sensitivity could determine their desire to escape from society into a closed community of the sect that promises security and healing from psychological trauma.

They also tend to ponder and perform self-analysis followed by an inevitable self-flagellation. Subdued spirits, dreaminess, self-criticism are combined, however, with the general exaltation, the ability to get fully devoted to an idea and be fascinated with it so that everything else ceases to exist and have any personal meaning.

Using techniques of we conducted a double test of subjects of the two research groups with a period of three days. The correlation coefficients between the answers of the respondents were quite high ( $r = 0.867$ ,  $r = 0.894$ ), which allows us to conclude that the subjects of both the control group and the experimental group have a quite

**Table 2.** Results of the comparative analysis of accentuated personality traits of the subjects of the two study groups (parameters in bold are those showing statistically significant differences)

| Accentuation type | EG       | CG       | t    | p      |
|-------------------|----------|----------|------|--------|
| Hyperthymia       | 8.9±0.9  | 13.5±1.4 | 2.77 | <0.01  |
| Emotivity         | 16.8±1.6 | 12.6±1.2 | 2.10 | <0.05  |
| Anxiety           | 12.4±1.2 | 4.3±0.4  | 6.43 | <0.001 |
| Ostentation       | 6.7±0.9  | 12.3±1.2 | 4.93 | <0.001 |
| Distimity         | 14.9±1.5 | 11.2±1.1 | 1.98 | >0.05  |
| Fixedness         | 8.8±0.9  | 10.9±1.1 | 1.48 | >0.05  |
| Pedantry          | 6.9±0.7  | 5.8±0.6  | 1.19 | >0.05  |
| Cyclothymia       | 8.2±0.8  | 13.1±1.3 | 3.20 | <0.01  |
| Affectability     | 3.2±0.3  | 9.4±1.0  | 5.96 | <0.001 |
| Exaltation        | 17.2±1.7 | 12.8±1.3 | 2.06 | <0.05  |

stable value system, despite the fact that members of non-traditional religious organizations are quite suggestible and conformable.

Ranking of the proposed list of terminal values demonstrates, above all, the similarity of ideas of members of non-traditional religious organizations about the man’s ultimate goal of his individual existence. It is necessary to mention that our study was attended by young people who had been members of a religious sect or a union for more than half year, which could not but impact their value system.

The top lines in the hierarchy of terminal values of members of destructive religious organizations contain: self-confidence, that is the inner harmony, freedom from internal contradictions and intrapersonal conflicts, doubts and torments, and development (i. e., constant physical and spiritual self-improvement), and life wisdom (judgement maturity achieved through live experience).

It is worth noting that such values as proactive living, interesting job and productive life are, on average, at the last places of the hierarchy of values of members of non-traditional religious organizations Table 3. Members of

**Table 3.** Results of the comparative analysis of value orientations of the subjects of the two study groups

| Value orientations        | EG     |           | CG     |           |
|---------------------------|--------|-----------|--------|-----------|
|                           | rating | rank      | rating | rank      |
| Self-confidence           | 1.6    | <b>1</b>  | 2.0    | <b>2</b>  |
| Development               | 1.9    | <b>2</b>  | 10.2   | <b>11</b> |
| Life wisdom               | 3.2    | <b>3</b>  | 16.6   | <b>17</b> |
| Cognition                 | 3.8    | <b>4</b>  | 14.3   | <b>15</b> |
| Having friends            | 5.2    | <b>5</b>  | 8.8    | <b>9</b>  |
| Beauty of nature and art  | 6.2    | <b>6</b>  | 17.2   | <b>18</b> |
| Happiness of other people | 7.4    | <b>7</b>  | 12.2   | <b>13</b> |
| Creativity                | 7.9    | <b>8</b>  | 13.4   | <b>14</b> |
| Health                    | 8.9    | <b>9</b>  | 2.4    | <b>3</b>  |
| Welfare                   | 10.2   | <b>10</b> | 4.2    | <b>5</b>  |
| Love                      | 10.9   | <b>11</b> | 3.4    | <b>4</b>  |
| Family                    | 12.3   | <b>12</b> | 5.8    | <b>6</b>  |
| Social esteem             | 12.7   | <b>13</b> | 8.2    | <b>8</b>  |
| Productive life           | 13.6   | <b>14</b> | 9.6    | <b>10</b> |
| Proactive living          | 14.8   | <b>15</b> | 1.8    | <b>1</b>  |
| Freedom                   | 16.9   | <b>16</b> | 11.7   | <b>12</b> |
| Interesting job           | 16.8   | <b>17</b> | 6.8    | <b>7</b>  |
| Entertainment             | 17.1   | <b>18</b> | 15.0   | <b>16</b> |

non-traditional religious organizations assess at a low rate the values such as family and love, whereas young people having nothing to do with religious neo-cults place these values at higher levels of the hierarchy of their value orientations.

The results of the study of the level of subjective control of the subjects of the two groups using the Methods of diagnostics of the level of subjective feelings of loneliness by Table 4 are also interesting.

It has been revealed that members of non-traditional religious organizations have a low level of general internality. They tend to believe, more likely than subjects in the control group, that all the events of their lives are due to a chance or actions of others. Most of them do not see the connection between their actions and the events significant to them, and they do not consider themselves able to control this connection.

Honestly significant differences between the two study groups were recorded on the “Internality in the field of failures” and “Internality in the field of family and interpersonal relations” scales.

Most of the members of non-traditional religious organizations tend to shift the responsibility for negative events in their lives, their troubles and sufferings on the circumstances or actions of others. A majority of the members of non-traditional religious organizations blame

not themselves but their partners in dialogue, other family members for disharmony in their interpersonal relations. The low level of subjective control of members of non-traditional religious organizations characterizes them as very selfish, but dependent, under confident and characterless people.

The results of multivariate study of personality (Cattell’s multivariate personality study questionnaire) have confirmed our preliminary findings and have completed our “psychological profile” of the person involved in destructive religious organizations.

Thus, honestly significant differences between the subjects of the two study groups, recorded during the statistical processing of empirical material, allow us to draw the following conclusions.

Members of non-traditional religious organizations are less open-minded and kind-hearted, sociable and not as good-natured as their age-mates, not fascinated by the relevant ideas. Most of them do not show naturalness and ease of behavior, care, kindness and soft-heartedness in communication and relations with other people. They are more self-contained and indifferent, despite the fairly high rating of the “happiness of other people” value, identified in the previous phase of the study. In this regard, we can say that the majority of the members of non-traditional religious organizations are not sincere in their statements, they tend to exaggerate their importance and inadequately interpret their actions and the actions of others Table 5.

Members of non-traditional religious organizations are generally characterized by a certain emotional thought disorder, lack of intelligence and erudition.

The greatest differences between the two study groups were recorded on the “C” scale reflecting the peculiarities of emotional and volitional sphere of personality.

In general, the emotional-volitional sphere of personality of the individual members of non-traditional religious organizations is characterized by low intolerance towards frustration.

Most of them show the instability of interest, emotional intensity, labile mood, irritability, increased fatigability and frequent neurotic outbursts. They, in contrast to the control group subjects, are less hard-working, emotionally mature and realistic. Members of non-traditional religious organizations are prone to volatility, are governed by feelings, circumstances and occasion. They show more flexible attitude toward the social norms of behavior comparing to the young people not fascinated by non-traditional religious teachings.

**Table 4.** Results of the comparative analysis of the level of subjective control of the subjects of the two study groups

| Questionnaire scales                                | EG         | CG         | t    | p      |
|---|------------|------------|------|--------|
| General internality                                 | 3.95 ± 0.4 | 5.55 ± 0.5 | 2.50 | < 0.05 |
| Internality in the field of achievements            | 4.0 ± 0.4  | 5.5 ± 0.6  | 2.08 | > 0.05 |
| Internality in the field of failures                | 3.5 ± 0.4  | 5.4 ± 0.5  | 2.97 | < 0.05 |
| Internality in the field of family relations        | 3.8 ± 0.4  | 5.9 ± 0.6  | 2.92 | < 0.05 |
| Internality in the field of labour relations        | 4.2 ± 0.4  | 6.2 ± 0.6  | 2.78 | < 0.05 |
| Internality in the field of interpersonal relations | 3.4 ± 0.3  | 5.2 ± 0.5  | 3.10 | < 0.01 |
| Internality in the field of health and disease      | 4.8 ± 0.5  | 5.2 ± 0.5  | 0.56 | > 0.05 |



**Table 5.** Results of the comparative analysis of personal characteristics of the subjects of the two study groups

| factors        |   | EG        | CG        | t    | p      |
|----------------|---|-----------|-----------|------|--------|
| A              | “unsociability – sociability”                       | 3.4 ± 0.3 | 6.9 ± 0.7 | 2.97 | <0.01  |
| B              | “intelligence”                                      | 3.2 ± 0.3 | 6.4 ± 0.6 | 5.00 | <0.001 |
| C              | “emotional instability – emotional stability”       | 2.6 ± 0.3 | 6.6 ± 0.7 | 3.39 | <0.001 |
| E              | “subordinance – dominance”                          | 5.8 ± 0.6 | 6.2 ± 0.6 | 0.47 | >0.05  |
| F              | “self-control – expressivity”                       | 4.7 ± 0.5 | 5.6 ± 0.6 | 1.03 | >0.05  |
| G              | “weak norm compliance – high norm compliance”       | 2.9 ± 0.3 | 5.4 ± 0.5 | 4.31 | <0.001 |
| H              | “timidity – audacity”                               | 4.8 ± 0.5 | 5.0 ± 0.5 | 0.34 | >0.05  |
| I              | “strictness – sensitivity”                          | 3.2 ± 0.3 | 3.8 ± 0.4 | 0.92 | >0.05  |
| L              | “trustfulness – suspiciousness”                     | 5.9 ± 0.6 | 4.9 ± 0.5 | 1.28 | >0.05  |
| M              | “idealism – pragmatism”                             | 6.0 ± 0.6 | 3.9 ± 0.4 | 2.92 | <0.01  |
| N              | “directness- diplomacy”                             | 5.2 ± 0.5 | 5.4 ± 0.5 | 0.28 | >0.05  |
| O              | “anxiety – calmness”                                | 6.7 ± 0.7 | 4.0 ± 0.4 | 3.33 | <0.001 |
| Q <sub>1</sub> | “conservatism – radicalism”                         | 5.3 ± 0.5 | 5.6 ± 0.6 | 0.48 | >0.05  |
| Q <sub>2</sub> | “conformism – nonconformism”                        | 2.4 ± 0.3 | 5.8 ± 0.6 | 5.07 | <0.001 |
| Q <sub>3</sub> | “low self-control – high self-control”              | 3.1 ± 0.3 | 6.2 ± 0.6 | 4.63 | <0.001 |
| Q <sub>4</sub> | “relaxation – tension”                              | 6.0 ± 0.6 | 4.8 ± 0.5 | 1.54 | >0.05  |
| MD             | “reasonable self-esteem – unreasonable self-esteem” | 5.2 ± 0.5 | 6.1 ± 0.6 | 1.15 | >0.05  |

The existence of specific strictures encourages most of them to do the opposite: to break them and thereby to gain self-confidence.

Despite the fact that we did not find honestly significant differences between the two study groups in the “L” factor, speaking about tendency we can say that young people involved in destructive religious organizations are more jealous, possessive, suspicious and mistrustful than their age-mates who do not share their aspirations. For most of them an important issue is the self-conceit; they are more self-centered and focused on themselves, on their needs and their problems.

At the same time, members of non-traditional religious organizations have an increased level of imagination focused to their inner world, and quite high creative personality potential.

Anxiety, depression, vulnerability, morbid imagination, sensibility, as opposed to a cold-bloodedness and self-confidence, are typical for the destructive religious organization member more than for those young people who are resistant to the influence of such organizations.

Statistically significant differences were also found in the “Q<sub>2</sub>” factor: the subjects of the experimental group are generally characterized by the lack of initiative in

decision-making, lack of independence of judgment in conjunction with the self-centering and aspiration for social approval. The lack of initiative in decision making coupled with egocentrism and increased attention to their own problems and suffering, focusing on the acquisition of inner peace and self-confidence increases the chance of falling under the influence of a group pressure. Increased need for approval and support of the people switches on defense mechanisms related to a quite mobile, unstable system of value orientations. On the other hand, the violation of any social norms does not cause much concern and worry in most of them. Therefore, we can conclude that inner conflicts of self-images are in general typical for members of destructive religious organizations<sup>4,7,11,15,16,22</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

Persons involved in destructive religious and ethno-nationalist organizations are characterized by:

- Lack of independence of judgment in conjunction with the self-centering and aspiration for social approval;
- Lack of initiative in decision making combined with egocentrism and increased attention to their own problems and suffering, focusing on the acquisition of inner

peace and self-confidence, which increases the chance of falling under the influence of a group pressure;

- Increased need for approval and support, which switches on defense mechanisms related to a quite mobile, unstable system of value orientations;

- Inner conflicts of self-images;

Violation of any social norms does not cause much concern and worry in most of them. Countering the involvement of young people in destructive religious organizations can be organized on purpose, and be a spontaneous process based on the high level of development of personal psychological resources. As an effective technology to counter the involvement of young people in destructive religious and ethno-nationalist organizations, it is appropriate to consider the development of their ethno-civil, religious, personal and professional identities.

Potentially counteracting personal resource includes a higher level of critical thinking, subjective locus of control in the field of achievements and interpersonal relations, emotional stability, a low level of suggestibility and conformity, which naturally reduces the risk of being involved in destructive religious and ethno-nationalist organizations.

The main condition for the prevention of ethnic extremism is not a struggle against nationalism of any kind, but preventing its "extremes" and smoothing the factors of radicalization of ethnic nationalism among young people, avoiding taking preventive measures in some ethnic groups while disregarding the other ones.

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